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Woman avoids jail time, must repay \$70,000

By MATTHEW JONES, The Virginian-Pilot

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VIRGINIA BEACH —

The former president of an association that raises money to train young gymnasts pleaded guilty Monday to embezzling about \$70,000 from the group's weekly bingo games.

The plea keeps the woman, Julie A. Macaluso, from going to prison as long as the Association of Gymnastic Parents Inc. gets its money back.

Macaluso, 45, was charged in July with embezzlement, forgery and submitting a false report. She pleaded guilty to all three crimes Monday.

She did not speak in court, except to answer questions from Circuit Judge A. Joseph Canada Jr. as he read from the plea agreement.

The agreement suspends all 21 years of Macaluso's prison time. In exchange, she agrees to repay, via monthly installments, everything she stole. Macaluso also is barred from holding office in a charity for the next two decades and must maintain good behavior for as long.

The two sides have yet to hammer out the exact repayment amount but agree it's about \$70,000. Macaluso brought a \$20,000 cashier's check to court Monday as a down payment. She will pay \$500 a month starting in May.

"It's a lot of money to not go to jail, if you ask me," Canada told her.

Macaluso was caught after an audit by the state Department of Charitable Gaming, which regulates fund-raising bingo games. The audit revealed that Macaluso had diverted "substantial sums of money" from the association's checking account to several of her own accounts.

The association helps pay for students to train at Excalibur Gymnastics on Arrowhead Drive, which has produced several nationally competitive gymnasts. One was a finalist for the 2004 U.S. Olympic team.

The bingo games were held Saturday nights starting in 2002 at Lynnhaven Bingo Hall, near Lynnhaven Mall.

Most of the illegal transfers were done online between February and December 2003, the department said. The audit began in January 2004 after the bingo game's manager found the group's account depleted.

At the time, Clyde E. Cristman, the gaming department's director, said it was the biggest case involving charitable bingo in Hampton Roads since 1997, when five people were charged with defrauding games sponsored by youth baseball associations in Portsmouth and Chesapeake.

Macaluso declined to comment Monday through her attorney, Afshin Farashahi. About a dozen people with the gymnastics association were in the courtroom as well.



**Julie A.
Macaluso**

"It's the best we could have hoped for for both parties," said the group's spokeswoman Nancy Jenkins. She said they plan to use the money to repay parents and settle the group's debts.

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